

“Potential”

For most of us, Christmas marks the beginning of the story. The infant Jesus; nervous parents; curious visitors. The story we know so well points to something new, and wonderful, and tender, taking place in Bethlehem of Judah, and our Christmas celebrations affirm that year after year.

Lights and decorations, presents and parties, song and story; this how we share the ‘good news’. Today we sing and celebrate with hymns of anticipation and anthems of joy – not to mention the celebration of Holy Communion - as we wait on that glorious day which, for modern Christians, marks the beginning of this glorious good news. Our heads and hearts may already be there – at the crèche; in the small, star-lit stable, with the angel’s afterglow still shining in our eyes. But our preparations have only just begun. The Advent of the nativity is not half over. And while visions of sugarplums may already be dancing in our heads, this morning’s reading from Matthew’s gospel is a jarring reminder that we’re not there yet.

Isaiah, as the prophet to the conquered nation, and champion of those without hope, offers the notion of a radical future - John the Baptist warns of sharp changes in the present. And between these two seemingly opposite visions, we might find hope.

It would be easy to get distracted by John’s appearance, or his thunderous warnings about repentance and fire, so let Isaiah’s words draw us away from fear.

A messenger has been promised, and sent, to generation after generation. God has never failed to raise up prophets to point toward the promise that one day, all would be made new. The rough places plain – the crooked paths made straight. These promises are repeated (in many ways by a variety of voices) until we arrive in Roman occupied Palestine. To this generation, struggling under foreign rule in the promised land, the promise takes on flesh. The shadow of Isaiah’s words – ancient and full of hope – resolve into the figure of John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. The Baptizer, himself a miracle baby, has accepted the prophet’s mantle now that he is an adult.

Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; declaring that he (John) is ‘just the messenger’. “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after

me...” The advent of this powerful child of God is a strange and wonderful reminder that the promised Saviour comes to a world that is not quite right.

The self-styled righteous are denounced as ‘vipers.’ Those who think they have it all figured out are left trembling in their boots. There is the promise of judgement. Retribution. Fire. But John is - in how own, harsh and direct manner - calling people to let go of the false expectations that they have held for so long. God’s people have infinite potential - the hope of the kingdom - the promise of peace - the joy of the Lord - the love of God - are part of who we are. John would call us back to our true selves

Our hunger to rush to the manger - to welcome the infant Jesus, and celebrate **the potential** that exists in this innocent, remarkable child - is fed by the promise that babies represent. Every child we’ve ever known has the potential to be anything. New life represents virtually unlimited possibility, and Christmas has become the epitome of this, not just in the Church – coming as it does at the start of a fresh liturgical calendar – but for society in general. You better not pout; you better not cry – remake yourself and start the year with fresh perspective and some cool new stuff; that’s the message of corporate Christmas.

But the gospels go beyond **potential**, and Matthew’s gospel gives us another glimpse of the promise so long awaited. John. Baptizing and preaching; pointing to Jesus - just coming through the crowd – just about to begin his daring and grace-filled journey from Jordan to Jerusalem.

Certainly Jesus’ story represents a renewal of our potential. And Scripture reminds us that our potential can be reclaimed at any stage of life. Meeting John (and then Jesus) as adults, and knowing that Jesus, fully grown, will meet many of the same difficulties, frustrations and moments of delight that we have also faced gives us some grown-up hope as Christmas beckons.

Not that we should ever abandon the joyful hope that children bring to the season. Not that the infant Jesus is any less our Saviour than the Risen Christ. But our faith lets us celebrate the potential that lives within us – parent, grandparent, neighbour and friend. Hear that good news that reminds us of life to which God calls us - a life of freedom, hope, peace and love – all of which is ours in Jesus. Amen

